



# Options for the left in the time of populism

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If there is a single political term which even those indifferent to public life have heard in the past year, it is populism. The phenomenon has shaken the existing world order, yet there is still no consensus as to what it means or whether it does necessarily pose a threat to progressive values. In the western world some left-wing and progressive parties have responded to the new spirit of the age by situating themselves in radical opposition to populism, others by adopting it into their own politics. In this article we examine the possible reactions to this radically changing political environment.

Although populism itself is no new concept, in western liberal democracy it is only in recent years that this isolated phenomenon has become a defining trend. While eight years – or two parliamentary terms – ago there were in total only two countries among the member states of the European Union where at least one third of the electorate voted for a populist party, last year there were twelve. Meanwhile in nine countries populists have come to power solitarily or through a coalition and in a further two countries populist parties support minority governments. In western and eastern Europe the right-wing populists have gained ground; in the Mediterranean countries the left-wing. Only in the smallest member state of the European Union, Malta, no significant populist party exists, while in one of the most populous, France, the populist leader reached the second round of the recent presidential elections, gathering one third of the voters behind her. Meanwhile, the world has been turned upside down by the decision of voters in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's rise to presidency in the United States.

The rise of populism is by no means an isolated, local phenomenon. To varying degrees it affects almost every western democracy and is spreading like a virus, reaching ever more voters. But what actually is populism and what is the novelty about it?

### Competing definitions for a new trend

There are as many interpretations of the term populism as there are people who use it. Of course this is true of many scientific terms, even those in common use, but the definition of populism is muddied further by the lack of agreement among political scientists as regards to its exact usage. Depending on which element of populism one might stress, populism can be democracy's greatest rival, the embodiment of demagoguery and authoritarian aspirations, or an empowered voice for ignored social groups, presenting the rightful demands of the people as opposed to the old, elitist political class.

One thing is clear, "populism" is neither completely equatable with demagoguery, dangerous to democracy, nor does it merely mean the use of simplified promises or the hunt for popularity. After all, simplified promises and the hunt for popularity have featured in every politician's repertoire, at least to some degree. Ambition for popularity, easily understandable rhetoric or easily acceptable campaign promises have been integral parts of politics since the beginning of time. Populism is more than representing the "people". The "people", the "nation" or the "voters" naturally bear significant importance for all democratic politicians. To this day, the Gettysburg Address in which Abraham Lincoln spoke of a power "of the people, by the people, for the people" is considered a guideline by non-populist politicians.

Hence the new spirit of the age is identified by many as illiberalism. The followers of this approach see the common factor among the growing new political figures to be that each one casts off liberal values both culturally and economically. Instead of the current representative democracy, the politicians of the new spirit of the age idealise a system in which democratic institutions, such as parliament and government-inspecting bodies,

have less of a role to play and in which during the periods between elections the political leader, possessing a strong mandate, stands in direct relation with the electorate. At the same time, referendums are also deemed important as "the word of the people" which the political elite must follow.

Although it is a fact that these illiberal fantasies pop up among numerous politicians, in reality such authoritarian aspirations are mostly typical for East Europe. The French Marine Le Pen or the Dutch Geert Wilders clearly have no desire to tear down the institutional system of liberal democracy. They are anti-Muslim and anti-migrant but they do not attack absolutely all liberal values. As for the left-wing populists – such as Syriza or the Spanish Podemos – one would not question their support of liberal democracy. Illiberalism does overlap with populism here and there – but it is certainly not the most accurate description of the new world.

It is also clear that the majority of new populists oppose economic liberalism and its elements, such as the free movement of goods, capital and people, while continuously referring to the protection of the nation. For every one of the newly rising political figures the nation plays an important role as opposed to internationalism, and defence and closure as opposed to openness. While the right-wing populists would "defend" the people firstly against foreigners, immigrants and ethnic minorities, the left are against the banks, big business and corrupt politicians. Right-wing populism defends on an ethnic/cultural basis, left-wing populism on an economic basis.

Populism is often identified with a struggle against a more general "enemy": an opposition to the existing political and economic elite, an anti-establishment attitude. This approach describes today's political trends in somewhat more detail; most politicians recognised as populists were not previously in power and one central element of their politics is their unified contempt of figures of the neo-liberal economy of the current and previous years. At the same time, just because someone criticizes the elite or neoliberals does not mean they are a populist. The radical left-wing parties, the green parties or even the pirate parties do that – and yet

we recognise the difference between them and the new populists. Naturally we would not put Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Donald Trump into one ideological category. Moreover the new representatives of the populist movements were most often previously figures of public life: take, for example, Viktor Orbán who has been a member of the Hungarian political elite for thirty years, or Donald Trump who has been the epitome of the American economic elite for decades.

A more accurate – yet still too broad – definition of the new political figures is the classic interpretation given by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, who believes the populist politician is one who presents the world as an irreconcilable fight between the unspoiled people and the corrupt elite, and who deems himself to be the exclusive representative of the people. Mudde believes that populists differ from other politicians in that they see the world as a fight in which they do not represent certain social groups but the entire people. Therefore, most often they do not recognise other politicians as being legitimate – after all, if the populists represent every citizen, the people as a whole, then there is no need for any other interest representation. Left-wing defenders of populism stress that the fight between the elite and certain classes is present even when the current elites do not reinforce it, but deny it in their rhetoric. They believe that the fight is caused by the neoliberal elite practice of governance, under which entire social classes founder economically and become unviable in matters of political access.

Despite the variety of interpretations of populism, by highlighting the most important factors of the various definitions we can recognise today's trends: criticism of mainstream parties and the liberal political and economic elite; the contrast of politicians and the people; simple political messages and solutions; aspirations to be the exclusive representative of the people; transcendence of representative democracy; constant reference to the enemy – all of these are clearly on the rise in today's world.

Depending on which element of populism a given politician may stress, they may be acceptable ac-

ording to left-wing values or quite to the opposite. Populism is at odds with left-wing and liberal democratic values when it resembles demagoguery; the politics of prejudice and depicting enemies; acting in the name of the people and simultaneously excluding them. Populism and the left tally when the goal of populism is purely the replacement of the neoliberal economic and political elite.

### The left's response to populism

Although with the rise of populism the steady fall of social democracy is apparent, the scale of this is not as dramatic as news broadcasts would imply. Currently 22 percent of EU citizens would vote for a centre-left party, 8 percent for a populist or far left, and 5 percent for the greens. In contrast, centre-right parties hold 24 percent, while both Eurosceptic right-wing parties as well as liberals hold 9 percent. Every other party would receive 23 percent – the majority of which are far right or right-wing populists. Therefore the old fundamental two-way divide of the political playing field has become a three-way divide, wherein the left are not only competing against the conservatives but the populists as well. This competition is by no means over, the three political sides currently have more or less equal support in Europe – naturally with varying trends and possibilities from country to country.

The left have taken to the fight against the populists with different strategies. The first easily definable direction could be termed the "as if nothing's changed" strategy. The left-wing powers following this strategy believe that the continued representation of their old, accustomed and traditional policies will be profitable in the long run and their disappointed voters will soon return. They regard populism as the adversary of common sense, reliability and technocratic politics, against which one must defend the values of progression and liberal representative democracy. They might maintain the same attitude towards populist parties as they use towards the far right – deeming both ideologies to be the enemy of democracy. They believe that if they continue unchanged along the same path – including the need for compromise with the European centre-right economic policy, social po-

licies which focus on the equal opportunities of minorities, and professional politics rather than emotional politics – , then populism’s disappointed voters will sooner or later return to those left-wing politicians deemed capable of governance, who can provide real solutions rather than empty promises to the most vulnerable layers of society. What is more; followers of this centrist strategy can more easily imagine a coalition with the centre-right conservative powers, than with the far left or even the greens. In many western European countries, including Austria and Germany, we can see the left following this strategy, by no means with roaring success but avoiding total annihilation. In countries where the left and right have continued centrist politics, it is easier to imagine the party structure’s radical transformation in the long run, where on one side of the political fault line the old centre-right and centre-left establishment parties – be it in cooperation or not – and on the other the new radical, populist formation will lie. We already witnessed signs of this in the Austrian presidential election of spring last year, when this new style of line-up, involving Norbert Hofer and Alexander Van der Bellen, split the country almost precisely in two.

Some left-wing parties in the southern European countries are following a radically different strategy, a kind of “Mediterranean model”. In Greece, Spain and Portugal newly founded left-wing powers were the first to address voters disappointed by the economic and political elite, and in time could stand at the head of the anti-establishment movement. They were so successful that in these countries no xenophobic right-wing populist parties have been able to grow steadily. Rather than in immigration and refugees, the new left-wing formations sought the source of problems in the economic elite that caused the economic crisis, and not only were they unwilling to govern in coalition with centre-right parties, but centre-left parties as well. In the rhetoric of these Eurosceptic but not anti-EU, patriotic but not nationalist, protectionist but not chauvinistic parties one reoccurring element was the idea of them representing the people against the elite. Their politicians – like for example the Greek Yanis Varoufakis – believe that the true political fault lines are not between

the right-wing populists and the elite, but between the progressive thinkers and the establishment that masterfully upholds right-wing populism. The Greek Syriza and other charismatic left-wing politicians also emphasize that one can stand for defending minorities without ignoring the weakening middle class and the working class.

In Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Portugal left-wing populists receive over 20-30 percent of the vote in elections – while in Spain and Portugal the traditional social democratic party has not collapsed under them either.

But in other countries right now there are no similar successes. In the United States Bernie Sanders and in the United Kingdom Jeremy Corbyn are trying to seize upon the spirit of the age by similar means. Even though Corbyn won the Labour leadership election there has been significant opposition to his distinctive change of direction among the left-wing elite, both inside and outside the Labour party. The self-proclaimed democratic socialist politician stands radically against the Labour party’s previous direction: as a pacifist, he would have the United Kingdom leave NATO; he is anti-austerity and a supporter of the nationalisation of public services; a firebrand Eurosceptic, while at the same time liberal as regards to human and minority rights. Corbyn strives to represent the people’s voice in the face of the Tory elite, and he uses his parliamentary opposition to “give voice to the people”, reading letters written to him by voters in parliamentary sessions. The results of the new direction are yet to be seen; the true test of Corbyn’s politics will be the snap general election held in June this year. For the time being polls show a gradual decrease in the popularity of the Labour party.

The American democrats, held to be liberals rather than left-wing by European standards, chose the third option in responding to right-wing populism. The politics represented by former president Barack Obama stands most definitively against all illiberal notions, and by focussing expressly on emotions offered voters optimistic solutions built on “hope” in lieu of the right-wing populists’ politics built on “hate”. Although in the 2008 campaign

Obama did promise to represent the people in the face of the Washington elite, the former president did not expropriate the concept of “the people” since he recognised the competition of varying beliefs and political pluralism. Yet representation of the people did not mean that he would give up his liberal beliefs in the interest of popularity. In fact, he did not follow society’s world view; he formed it. Among democrat voters the “sentimental, popular liberalism” of Obama obtained 83 percent of approval ratings, at the same time Obama is one of the most rejected presidents ever among the voters of the enemy camp.

The technocratic centrism in many countries of western Europe, the populist-radical left of southern Europe and the United Kingdom, the Mediterranean model, and the sentimental liberalism of American democrats are three entirely diverse strategies to counter building right-wing populism. The important question is of course, whether one of these could work in Hungary.

### Populism and the left in Hungary

If we take the Cas Mudde definition in which a party is termed populist if it rejects political pluralism, expropriates representation of the people, contrasts the people with the elite and creates policies around defeating its enemies, then Fidesz would certainly be recognised as populist in Hungary, Jobbik to a lesser degree. But since these two parties together address 67 percent of voters, in Hungary the support for populists is the highest in all of the European Union. In the last seven or eight years at least, the left has not found a solution to counter Hungarian populism, therefore it would be worthwhile considering which of the strategies employed in other countries could work for the left in Hungary.

It may be surprising to hear that the Hungarian centre-left is strong compared to the rest of the European centre-left. Considering recent elections in the 28 nations of the European Union, the 25.6% result received by the union of the left-wing (Unity) in the 2014 elections indicates a strong centre field, among the European centre-left parties Unity had the twelfth strongest support. The Italian De-

mocratic Party or the Slovakian Smer had a similar result. Society’s support of the Hungarian centre-left is therefore average in Europe. Not average, however, are the strength of Fidesz and the lack of parties of a non-centre-left ideology who might be potential coalition partners for the left.

That is why the appearance of political powers of a non-centre-left ideology might be the most successful in obstructing the rise of right-wing populism. This could entail the “Mediterranean model”, namely the radical left-wing alternative, or the “American democrat model”, namely the sentimental, popular liberal alternative – which is not left-wing, but progressive.

The economic and political left stand much closer to the values of the majority of Hungarians, especially in a country of ever-growing inequality it could contribute to economic development and greater social peace. The most important limit to the rise of this kind of political formation is the fact that Fidesz has seemingly appropriated numerous demands of the radical left, as though it were acting based on those principles. People close to Fidesz often cite the 1 percent economic elite ruling the world, the superprofit made by banks and multinational companies, the low Hungarian wages or the inability to promote economic development through austerity measures. For a potential radical left-wing power it would not be easy to pin these exact same issues to their flag – while stressing that unlike Fidesz they do want to address them properly. Since the populist right-wing adopted numerous left-wing economic and political demands in its rhetoric, there is less chance in countries where they embraced these demands before the left that the populist or radical left might take back the mandate – although it is not impossible in the least.

In contrast to economic and political leftness, only a narrower – although not insignificant – social group agrees with liberalism and most progressive values in general. Yet at the same time, if there is an antithesis to right-wing populism it is politics based on optimism, faith in humanism, positive sentiment, openness, future-orientation and freedom. These are territories inaccessible to

right-wing populists from which they cannot borrow ideas or trick voters. What we called “popular liberalism” above does not mean incessantly reiterating the need to defend the free market and minorities, but a future-oriented politics founded on freedom and development. This kind of politics evokes strong sentiments which perfectly contrast those conjured up by the right-wing populists.

It is not yet clear whether a supplementary radical left or a sentimental, progressive liberal political formation could spread besides the traditional social democratic powers in Hungary and counter right-wing populism. There are pros and cons to each argument: firstly as regards to which could spread in Hungary, secondly to which would be more useful for the country socially and economically. One thing is certain: the obstruction of the growth of right-wing populism is made significantly more difficult by the fact that these ideologies are missing entirely from the Hungarian political stage.

It is not yet clear – in Hungary as anywhere else in the world – which political formation will be the strongest adversary to right-wing populists: the old centrist elite, the liberals or the radical left. What may happen, as it did in the 20th century with other ideologies, is that in certain countries populism gets washed down the drain entirely, while in others autocracy develops – by force. Two things are definite: the growth of populism in democratic circumstances does not mean the loss of other values and ideologies – they will weaken at most – and in politics with every power an opposing power appears. The important question for the coming years will be which values would dominate this opposing power and which ideology would rule the populists’ successors.

**A Hungarian version of this analysis has been published by Új Egyenlőség and can be accessed at <http://ujegyenloseg.hu/a-baloldal-lehetosegi-a-populizmus-koraban/>**

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